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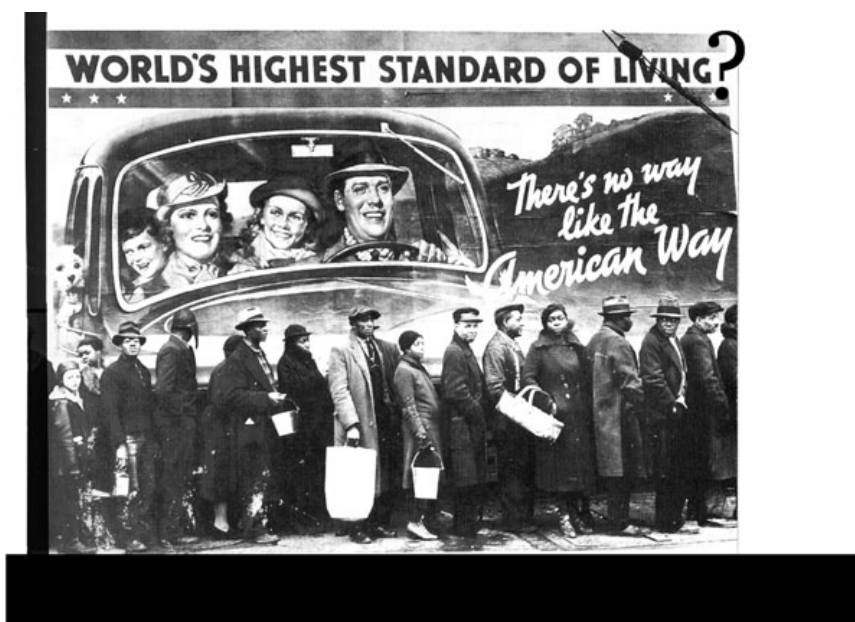
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Two Americas

By Alisha Bermejo



Increases in poverty were largest among blacks. The black poverty rate rose from 22.7 percent in 2001 to 24 percent in 2002, and the number of blacks who were poor increased by 500,000 or 700,000, depending on which definitional category of blacks is used.

Among black households, median income fell 2.5 or 3 percent (depending on the category used), a drop of \$762 or \$913. (2001 - 2002)

The latest CBO data, which were released a few weeks ago and cover years from 1979 to 2000, show that the average after-tax income of the top one percent of the population rose by \$576,000 — or 201 percent — between 1979 and 2000, after adjusting for inflation, while the average income of the middle fifth of households rose \$5,500, or 15 percent. The average income of the bottom fifth rose \$1,100, or 9 percent, over the 21-year period.

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that in 2002, some 36.8 percent of poor adults aged 18 – 64 were uninsured, as opposed to 10.8 percent of adults aged 18 – 64 with incomes above twice the poverty line. Among children, 14.5 percent of poor children were uninsured, compared to 5.3 percent of children with incomes above twice the poverty line.

In 2001, 44.5 percent of poor households with children experienced either food insecurity or hunger at some point during the year. (Households that experienced food insecurity were unable to acquire, or were uncertain of having, enough food to meet the basic needs of all household members, because they lacked sufficient income and resources.)

While the increase in poverty primarily reflects developments in the economy, weaknesses in the safety net — particularly in the temporary federal unemployment benefits program — also contributed to it. In 2002, some 2.2 million workers exhausted all of their unemployment benefits before finding a job and consequently received neither a paycheck nor an unemployment check for a period of time. Many of these individuals and their families are likely to have fallen into poverty. One reason their unemployment benefits ran out before they were able to find work is that the temporary federal unemployment benefits program that Congress established last year to aid long-term unemployed workers and their families during the economic slump is much more limited and offers significantly fewer weeks of unemployment assistance than the comparable program that Congress established during the economic slump of the early 1990s.

SOURCE: CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES (<http://www.cbpp.org/9-26-03pov.htm>)